

THE ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT
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"AVP is like a time machine, it gently sweeps you away to another reality; you can never return, you are permanently changed."

Overview and Background

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) began in 1975 in American prisons at a time when the emphasis was on security rather than rehabilitation. It was one of the few programs which helped inmates learn new skills and gain new insights to reduce conflict in their lives. It was presented in such a way as to empower the inmates and to help them feel better about themselves. The results have been that participants have become more motivated to improve their own lives and the lives of those around them. The general atmosphere of prisons where the Alternatives to Violence Project exists is calmer and less violent. Recently, the Chief of the Bureau of Prisons in Delaware commented, "I'd like to take this opportunity to express my support for and admiration of the Alternatives to Violence Program. As a Warden of a State Prison in Delaware I saw the AVP facilitate a dramatic reduction in the number of assaults between inmates in what had been a difficult maximum security unit. As the program continued to run and 'graduate' more and more inmates, the overall climate improved to a point where the inmates were actually seeking out ways to positively affect their environment. As the Chief of Prisons for Delaware, I've seen similar results in each of the prisons that have implemented Alternatives to Violence Programs. There have never been any security breaches and the staff and inmate population alike respect the AVP volunteers. I'd highly recommend the Alternatives to Violence Program to any correctional manager and especially to those experiencing a high level of inmate on inmate conflict."

There are currently more than 1800 volunteer trainers providing workshops in over a hundred prisons and in the general community, including numerous organizations, throughout the United States, Canada, Central and South America, New Zealand, Australia, Africa and Europe. Interest in the program has expanded by word of mouth, by reputation rather than through any formal channel. It began at Green Haven Prison in New York State when a group of inmates were preparing a program for youthful offenders. They asked local Quakers to help them develop a program which would teach these young people how to resolve conflicts nonviolently and, thus, stay out of prison. Those inmates and Quakers developed the first AVP model, which has since been improved upon in the thousands of workshops held throughout North and Central America. The AVP model has proven effective with a wide variety of groups because it is flexible, adaptable and based on experiential learning rather than the traditional lecture model. Participants enjoy the exercises and games which help them become more receptive to new ideas and to those conflict resolution techniques they already know but don't use.

The two primary emphases in AVP are the spiritual and the behavioral (or skills) aspects of conflict resolution. The central concept is called Transforming Power, i.e., "that power in each of us to change our attitudes in such a way as to disarm hostility and lead opponents to settle their conflicts to the satisfaction of all parties." It requires a belief that nonviolent solutions are possible, that there is something good, or of God, in every human being and that we must begin by understanding ourselves and changing our behavior and attitudes before we can effectively resolve conflict nonviolently. The skills taught focus on communication, with the most important aspect being active listening, i.e., truly listening to what is being said rather than thinking of ways to win an argument or to get your point across.

An important aspect of AVP is that trainers and participants are volunteers. Many participants come because they are curious; bored with their daily routine; desiring to impress someone; wanting to change their lifestyle or for some other reason. Whatever their reason for coming to AVP, it doesn't matter or even predict what they will get out of the program, so long as

they participate of their own free will. Participants learn skills in conflict resolution, problem solving, leadership, nonviolence, cooperation, communication and, in general, how to create more peace in their own lives.

There are three levels of training: the Basic, the Advanced and the Training of Trainers. Each is usually a three day twenty hour workshop. The Basic Workshop is the foundation, covering a wide variety of skills and experiences. The Advanced and Training of Trainers build on the previous level and have their own unique purpose and format. The Advanced Workshop is more intense and focuses on a select few areas chosen by the participants themselves. In contrast, the Training of Trainers provides an opportunity for the participants to develop their skills and confidence as trainers.

Rationale

Why do we train people in Alternatives to Violence? Because we believe that a life lived with dignity and self-respect, and the opportunity for self-actualization, is the birthright of every person. We believe that only when this birthright is made real, for all of us, will we have a just and peaceful world.

The society we live in is one of the most violent in the world. The high level of violence among our people is in part a response to the violence embedded in our institutions and our values. Some people more than others are entrapped by this violence and find that it fills their lives with trouble. But there is no one among us who does not share the capacity for violence, and none who is not hurt by it, one way or another.

We do not believe that people should live this way. And we do not believe that they have to live this way. We believe that there is in the universe a power that is able to transform hostility and destructiveness into cooperation and community, and to do justice among us. We believe that the power is everywhere; in us, in our opponents, and in the world around us. We believe that it is possible to tune in to it, and that if we do, it will enable us and our opponents to realize our birthright of peace and dignity. We believe that there are certain individual and group dynamics that make it possible to become attuned to this power; and that these dynamics can be learned and used by all people everywhere to build more constructive lives and healthier societies. AVP is our way of sharing these beliefs and these dynamics in order to bring this about.

Ours is a process of seeking and sharing, and not of teaching. We do not bring answers to the people with whom we work. We do not have the answers. But we believe that their answers lie buried in the same place as their questions and their problems - within themselves. Our job is to provide a stimulus and a safe, "seeker-friendly" environment to encourage them to search within themselves for solutions. People come to us with lifetimes of experience. We believe that all that experience is valuable, and that it can be built upon to make new lives. We try to draw out those experiences and help people to look at what they have gained from them. In doing so, we are ourselves in a constant process of learning, from each other and from them. Someone once said that "the unexamined life is not worth living." We endorse that, as much for ourselves as for others, and we try to make AVP an opportunity to examine life and make it more worth living.

The Workshop

Every AVP workshop is designed around the following themes: affirmation, community building, cooperation, communication and problem solving. The foundation is affirmation; affirmation of self and others which creates an environment of trust, safety and respect. These, in turn, create a sense of community in which people care about themselves and for each other. In this environment, participants can begin to look honestly at themselves and their relationship to conflict and its resolution. They are more open, focused, productive, have better concentration and memory, and have an increased enthusiasm for learning. This is due in large part to the lowered stress level of participants. According to the Chinese paradigm of yin and yang, the participants would be more in the receptive or yin mode. Furthermore, because the workshop is experiential rather than didactic, participants tend to remember longer what they've learned and are more likely to incorporate it into their lifestyles. Many participants are empowered, leaving the workshop with improved self-esteem,

which also reinforces what was learned.

Affirmation is achieved in several ways. Some exercises ask participants to review their accomplishments and other positive aspects of their lives, which few of us do for fear of 'bragging'. Most people focus on the negative aspects of their lives, e.g., what bad luck they have or what mistakes they've made. Most of us know people who walk around as if there were a dark cloud over their head, expecting bad things to happen and, sure enough, they do. It is important for us to acknowledge the good things in us and in our lives, those things for which we feel much pride. We accept that an athlete must think positively if s/he is going to excel, so why not for the rest of us? Also, playing games is an integral part of the workshops. Games tend to energize, loosen people up and generally bring participants closer together. Humor along with exercises which focus on appreciation and trust enhance the affirmation process and promote a sense of community. Finally, the ground rules for each workshop create an atmosphere of respect and cooperation. They are as follows: a) We look

for and affirm one another's good points; b) We refrain from put-downs of ourselves and others; c) We

listen to what each person has to say, we do not interrupt each other, and we do not speak too often or too long; d) We volunteer ourselves only; e) We observe confidentiality regarding the sharing of personal information and do not repeat it to others outside of the workshop; and e) Everyone has the right to pass on a particular exercise if they don't feel comfortable with it. The importance of cooperation is also explored in exercises where team work is the only way for anyone to be successful. Frequently some of the participants don't cooperate and this frustrates the group. This can be one of the most powerful learning experiences of a workshop.

The trainers model the behavior they are trying to teach. How they interact with the participants and other trainers sets the tone for the workshop. Part of the empowerment process is to involve the participants as much as possible. One way the trainers accomplish this is to preview the agenda for each session with the participants in order to give them an overview of what is going to happen. At the end of each session, the participants evaluate every exercise according to what they liked and found useful, what they disliked and what changes they would suggest. This shows that the trainers value and respect the participants' input.

Skills Training

In the Basic Workshop, three communication skills are taught, all of which enhance the workshop themes. Listening is the most important of these. A lot of time is spent on active listening because it is essential to conflict resolution and it is one of the most direct ways to show respect for someone else. The other two skill areas are assertive communication and problem solving. Respecting others is important, but equally important is respecting ourselves. If we do not respect ourselves, it will be difficult if not impossible to respect others. One way we can show respect for ourselves is to assertively tell others what our feelings and needs are. By being assertive, each party is being respected rather than one party getting their needs met at the expense of the other, i.e., the aggressive response. The third skill is problem solving, which involves the use of a specific model incorporating both active listening and assertive communication and resulting in a win/win solution. These three skills can go a long way toward empowering the participants to peacefully resolve their own personal conflicts.

Beyond these concrete skills, there is a concept taught which has proven to be very beneficial to those who apply it. It is called Transforming Power and it allows us to transform violent and destructive situations and behaviors into constructive and cooperative ones. It is that power we all have to change our own attitudes in such a way as to disarm hostility and lead opponents to settle their conflicts to the satisfaction of all parties. It is a power which works through us rather than being used by us. This is an important point, because the purpose is not to manipulate others but to change the situation, which includes 'us' as well as 'them.' If the purpose is to change the other person without changing oneself, then this is using force or power over the other person, which is not nonviolent. Thus, the distinction of using power or authority over someone versus using cooperation and collaboration with them. Authority, by definition, does not have to incorporate this type of verbal

or physical violence, but it often does.

There is a part of each one of us that at times wants to have things 'our way'. This part seems to condone violence in those situations in which we feel justified, besides violence does work! Or does it? Does it ever settle anything? Or does it set up a desire for revenge, an answering violence which makes it unsafe for everyone. And as Gandhi told us, the good that violence does is only temporary, while the harm is permanent. When faced with violence, people act out of fear and begin protecting themselves, and this requires mental as well as physical resources. As a result, the price one pays is giving up a sense of well-being. If the conflict is not resolved, it may escalate from being an uncomfortable relationship into becoming an adversarial one, i.e., where the parties become enemies. Violence tends to focus on who was right and who was wrong and how each one can justify their position. These dysfunctional relationships are at the core of every conflict. "But, you must fight fire with fire!" Everybody knows you don't fight fire with fire; you fight fire with water and that is exactly what Transforming Power is. It quenches the fire, cools hot tempers, reduces tensions and takes away fear and hostility with an attitude of good will.

Transforming Power deals with healing relationships by allowing people to safely express their feelings in a respectful manner. This makes it possible for them to begin to cooperate with and trust each other. This also stops the dehumanizing process and holds out the promise of a better and longer lasting peace and sense of well-being. There are several factors in being open to Transforming Power. It is a skill and like other skills, it must be practiced. By using it in minor, non-threatening situations, it will become apart of you and as more challenging situations are addressed, your actions will be natural without having to think about it. You must be willing to question the belief that violent or destructive solutions are the only ones possible and be willing to try something different. You must be willing to believe that a 'win/win' solution is possible, that there is something in your opponent, however hidden it may be, which is willing to join you in seeking such a solution. In dealing with relationships, there are no 'win/lose' solutions. If one loses, so does the other. The choice becomes either 'win/win' or 'lose/lose'. You must be willing to commit yourself to a nonviolent position knowing that there are risks involved and that you may have to suffer in order to maintain it. It does not mean you want to suffer anymore than anyone else. It recognizes that risks and suffering are apart of violence and nonviolence. The choice is not between suffering and security, but between destructive and life-affirming actions. Finally, and again most importantly, Transforming Power begins with transforming or changing yourself before others may change.

Being open to Transforming Power is a personal experience and no one can tell anyone else how to do it. Each one of us must find our own path. An example of one story is told by Fred Feucht (AVP/New York) about an AVP volunteer who was walking across Central Park in New York City late at night. Central Park is a dangerous place to be at night and she was walking home from the library with a heavy load of books in her arms. She heard footsteps behind her and a big man came up and crowded her to one side. "Hold-up!" she thought. But in a flash of inspiration she turned to the man and said, "I'm so glad you came along, my arms are aching from carrying these books. Won't you carry them for me?" and she dumped the whole load into his arms. To his surprise, he took them. They walked together to the door of her apartment and she held out her arms for the books, saying, "Thank you so much, you helped me no end." He replied lamely, "Lady, that wasn't what I was going to do." Another story told by Ellen Flanders (AVP/New York) of a participant in an AVP workshop who lived in an apartment house where there was much violence. One evening she heard a fight going on in one of the other apartments. She took her roommate with her to give her courage and they went to the door of the other apartment. They knocked and asked, "Is anything wrong; is there anything we can do to help?" The response was, "Oh, no, nothing is wrong; we just broke some dishes." Two things resulted from this; one was the fighting stopped for that night and the other was her roommate began to intervene in other violent situations. Two weeks later the man from that apartment stopped her and said, "I think you know what was going on in my apartment that night. And I want you to know that since then I have been trying to cool it. I have been trying not to be so violent towards my wife.

A prison psychologist commented about the effects of AVP on an inmate named Mike. When she first met him, he was a bully with other inmates and displayed restrained hostility toward the

guards and other prison staff. He would answer direct questions and participate in institutional gossip, but aside from that was unable or unwilling to express his thoughts or feelings. After attending AVP, his affect was noticeably different; approaching sunny. Along with his observable changes in affect and ability to communicate, she saw a pronounced change in his attitude toward his crime. Prior to this he had always insisted that his rape conviction was a mistake and that the victim really had consensual sex with him. He now takes responsibility for the rape and is able to express appropriate empathy for the victim. He is now able to articulate his thoughts and feelings but the most remarkable and moving change is that Mike is involved with other people at the empathic level. The psychologist has seen this on his face as he listens to others. She has heard other inmates comment to him about the change in his demeanor. He no longer is the bully he was with other inmates. Although participation in the Alternatives to Violence program was probably not the only influence for positive change, she is convinced that it intervened with Mike and provided him with an elevated confidence and ability to communicate at a time when he was treatment ready.

A central focus in each workshop are the twelve guides to Transforming Power. Each one is discussed in terms of its meaning, implications and appropriate behaviors which could be used to achieve it. They are: 1. Seek to resolve conflicts by reaching common ground; 2. Reach for that something good in others; 3. Listen before making judgments; 4. Base your position on truth; 5. Be ready to revise your position, if it is wrong; 6. Expect to experience great inward power to act; 7. Risk being creative rather than violent; 8. Use surprise and humor; 9. Learn to trust your inner sense of when to act; 10. Be willing to suffer for what is important; 11. Be patient and persistent; and 12. Build community based on honesty, respect and caring.

Concluding Comments

AVP workshops have been effective with a variety of groups. In prisons, inmate groups have been mixed with good success: maximum and minimum security; black and white; Muslim and Christian; and lifers and short term young drug offenders. In the community, workshops have included diverse groups, such as: government employees; university professors; laborers; at-risk youths; Christian fundamentalists; neopagan worshipers; mothers who have had their children taken away from them by the state; and so on. Because AVP is spiritually based and practical, and not religious or political, it is appropriate for most groups. It has been successfully used in a variety of cultures, e.g., Costa Rica, Canada, Northern Ireland, Russia, Israel, New Zealand and Poland.

A program can be established in a new area in several ways. An experienced trainer may move into an area where no program exists and establish one. A group interested in setting-up a program can send some of its members to a nearby program to get trained. The third way is to have experienced trainers come into the area, train local people and assist while they gain enough experience to facilitate their own workshops. AVP is not protective of its programs, only its name. Anyone can use AVP materials for whatever purpose they desire, but only sanctioned programs and trainers can use the name Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP).

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Comments from Prison Inmates

A sampling of comments by prison inmates may shed some light on the impact of AVP:

"I liked everything about AVP. The AVP program has left me with good spirits and feeling good about myself and people around me. I think even more positive about my life and things that I can apply to my daily life so that I can become a better person." "I have had nothing but good feelings about myself from the time I walked in the door to AVP. I thought that the program was going to 'stink'. I was wrong. It is nothing like I expected. As a lost soul needing help like this, AVP was there for me as well as others. I express the appreciation for everyone that made this happen."

"Of all the programs coming in here, none had so much respect shown for it"

"I found it to be very surprising, because I never would have believed it would or could ever be possible to get to know or work with any of them. As well as the fact that everyone worked together and helped each other in all of the exercises and groups."

"I think that this whole weekend has been a wonderful event that will remain with me throughout my life in useful ways, more that you could imagine."

"From my time spent here in the AVP program, I was able to find a person within myself who I never knew existed. I am now able to meet difficult situations and use the tools of AVP to handle them."

"Everyone was able to play a part in their own learning process. Each was able to find that there is more than what is on the outside of each other. There is an inner self that rules our lives."

"(AVP) helped me to open up to others and see different things about my life that I didn't even see or notice. (AVP) made me feel real good about myself."

"I think the group overall, throughout the three days was a great experience and I think everyone included has learned to be open and honest and have become a little more trusting in their fellow man."

"I really felt that most of the people had a lot of ugly things within them until we got into it. I soon found out that I was wrong because I got to understand a lot of them through the exercises and found out that they are some really good people."

". . . there are so many people in this world like myself who just need a little help along the way, someone who will understand and just listen . . . I came to the workshop looking and didn't really know what I was looking for. I now thank the Lord that I did. I feel that I've learned how to listen and if I truly and honestly work real hard at it, I will be the man I want to be."

". . . (AVP) helped me learn to listen before I make judgments. Something I would never do before is hear a person all the way through."

"It helped open my mind to new ideals towards life . . . I found out that this program can be fun as well as educating. It made me feel like I was someone and what I said was important."

"Made me realize it's not as hard as I thought to be honest with others and to respect and care for others opinions."

"All of us learned something this weekend which explains AVP's success rate."

"I feel that 99% of everyone who came got something good out of it, and that is very good."

"I have lots of nightmares with this monster about to grab me and I wake up in a cold sweat. I'm afraid to go back to sleep because the monster will get me. But, this morning, I woke up feeling really good. I had a wonderful dream that I was helping needy children in Africa. I wanted to go back to sleep to see if the good dream would come back because it felt so good."

Comments from Russian Participants

A number of workshops have been done with a variety of participants in Russia, e.g., doctors, nurses, business executives, engineers, teachers, peace activists, students, Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel and a TV journalist. Some of their comments follow:

"AVP is the most developed and well organized of all nonviolent workshops we've experienced. It is the first time we have had the same number of participants at the end as in the beginning, and that includes world class trainers [who have presented here]." Transforming Power is something that I've been feeling intuitively." "The importance of thinking about your partner in communication. The techniques of expressing one's feelings in transforming conflict. Role plays, concentric circles, I messages and 6 pt problem solving were very popular because, "these things contribute to better openness and understanding and trust," and they "can be used in everyday communication with people and in teaching." Role plays "make it possible to look at and analyze real life situations", and they "allow me to discover things inside of myself that I hadn't known about." "I have seen another shade of the Russian Soul." "When I look into the mirror, I see my eyes. When I look into my partners eyes, I see God." "Thank you for the experience of talking truth to each other." "I got up at 2:00 this morning to get to this workshop." "This is more than a group, a flower bud - a very special wonderful thing." "I love this group because of the communication I may never experience again." "I feel calm and safe in this group - I want to work with others in it." "I felt like I was in a circle of close friends."

"Thanks for those rare moments of spiritual development I've experienced." "We are internally ready to solve conflicts." "A bit too relaxed; everything is too good for me here now." "When I accept my opponent, solutions are easy." "Now I have some experience of effective work in a collective on the basis of trust and cooperation. "I had a lot of fun and I'm now convinced that any situation can be resolved." "The program is organized in such a way that everyone has a chance to speak and be heard which makes people feel they are personalities whose opinions [are] important for others." "The free, relaxed atmosphere." "Thank you very much for the happiness of communication, for the joy you brought us." "In our difficult times you give people a sense of self assurance and faith in each other." "Personally for me the most valuable was the presence of wise and sensitive people (the participants) who are very rich and strong spiritually. Without them it would not have been possible." "I haven't thought enough about nonviolent conflict resolution before. It may sound banal, but resolving conflicts and reaching compromise is more real for me now." "Although you can't change everything overnight, there's hope now and some skills for it to become true." "It's incredible, it's great. The wall came down. AVP makes real change from effects of communism, 70 years is hard to change. It breaks down barriers between employees. It's our first experience of freedom and what it means." "The mere fact that such workshops and groups still exist proves that not everything is lost yet. There's still hope that these 'lonely voices' will sometime become the spiritual basis of the society."